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Social Policy Shifts and the Relationship between Snap Workers and Their Clients

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

SOCIAL POLICY SHIFTS AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SNAP
WORKERS AND THEIR CLIENTS

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

PROGRAM IN SOCIOLOGY

BY

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ABSTRACT

In an effort to better understand how federal social policy changes shape the ways in which public service workers assist their clients in obtaining food benefits through Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programs (SNAP), previously known as food stamps, this study uses ethnography and interviews to capture the experiences of workers and their clients. Specifically, it examines how public service workers implement new policies while maintaining their professional identities and responding to the mission of their organization. These goals may be in tension. The key findings are that workers do not resist changes in policy because of the limitations of their job function, and their belief that any assistance from governmental programs should be temporary, in part because workers are always in positions to alter or bend regulations to meet client's needs. Second, workers were emotionally involved with their clients, but mainly through a focus on client success, not through criticisms of the program as the street-level bureaucracy literature expects. Third, this research shows that the workers did identify with the idea of self-sufficiency, but through the very specific lenses of two African-centered principles: *ujima* and *kujitegemea*, which suggests that the workers did not directly identify with the government's definitions of self-sufficiency. Since the organization's mission is to develop and assist families to become self-reliant which as a result will hope to improve the quality of their lives, and provide them with the opportunity to participate in rebuilding their community, these principles are a foundation

of how workers see their clients. *Ujima* means in order to build and maintain a community individuals must take on social problems as a unit and work as a collective in assisting individuals to solve their problems. *Kujitegemea* means to become self-reliant and independent of state assistance (government aid programs) in order to financially sustain a household.

THESIS

SOCIAL POLICY SHIFTS AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SNAP
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Introduction

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is an extension of government entitlement programs, such as unemployment compensation and Medicaid, and offers *nutrition assistance* to low-income individuals and families to secure a nutritionally adequate diet. According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) federal food aid began in 1933, during the Great Depression. In the early years, the poor were sometimes also given in-kind food aid, in the form of foods that were overproduced, purchased by the government, and then given to the poor. From the earliest years, food aid in the US was never supposed to be the only source of food for families, nor was it supposed to be nutritionally adequate for more than a very short period of time. Indeed, as many analysts have shown, keeping people off food aid, or severely limiting access to it, has been an explicit goal of federal lawmakers and county and state officials (Gordon 1994; Kotz 1969).

One of the major changes in the federal Food Stamp Program occurred in 1996, with the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). This act set a new tone that restructured aid provided to the poor (Watkins-Hayes, 2009). The new program direction is that food and cash assistance are

still provided for needy families; however such support is viewed as something temporary, even more so than in the past. Moreover, cash assistance under PRWORA is now delivered as part of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), which replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program. TANF provides cash assistance and in-kind resources, but instead of being delivered to individuals and families through the federal government, aid is delivered to states through block grants. States are believed to be more flexible in the development of their own welfare programs, within certain parameters. These new parameters include mandatory work requirements, participation in child support enforcement, and sanctions against states for noncompliance (Watkins-Hayes, 2009). PRWORA also replaced the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) Program, and the Job Training Partnership Act (JPTA) with the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), thereby consolidating and streamlining the nation's employment and training programs (Mink, 1998/2002). Moreover, in November 2013, the federal government reduced spending on SNAP, thereby reducing SNAP rolls by millions (Illinois Department of Human Services, n.d.).

One result of these changes is that states are able to outsource TANF caseloads to nonprofit agencies whose staff must implement these programs and ensure that clients are meeting the new standards. In Illinois, this includes workNet Centers or what are otherwise known as "workforce development centers." As "street level bureaucrats," (Lipsky 1980) staff members in these centers must navigate complex rules to assist people who themselves have difficult lives. As Lipsky and others have shown, these workers are both agents of the state *and* deliverers of services, human beings and

professionals who must acknowledge workplace mandates and legal boundaries.

The central goal of this research is to study how these recent social policy shifts and constraints have impacted SNAP workers' experiences as they attempt to assist their clients in obtaining food security through SNAP benefits. Specifically, I am interested in how workers experience the system through which they provide services, given the systemic complexities they face and the difficulties their clients' lives present. Policy shifts create challenges for the poor, but they also create challenges for people working to provide them services. To understand how SNAP workers navigate these relationships, I use ethnographic observation supplemented by interviews with SNAP workers in a Chicago-area organization that provides the training, work experience and education that clients need if they are to receive SNAP benefits under current guidelines.

Literature Review: Street Level Bureaucrats

The influence of social policy on public service workers has been investigated in social science literature. Michael Lipsky (1980) did foundational research that showed that a prospective client's contact with public service workers is a critical point in the implementation of social policy on the ground level. In other words, the implementation of policy comes down to the workers that are responsible for reinforcing and upholding regulations. Although he speaks to the conflicts that public servants experience when attempting to maintain their professional identities while interpreting social policy mandates, he does not focus on any one group in his study. However, Celeste Watkins-Hayes' (2009) study of welfare workers narrows the lens by focusing on how welfare policy is implemented and managed by caseworkers, by examining how workers dealt

with the change from Aid to Families with Dependent Children (ADC) to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) (Hayes 2009: 32). Watkins-Hayes' study shows how welfare office employees' duties have been shifted from providing clients with aid to helping clients find work. This transition under the new welfare reform policies forces workers to balance the cultural, political, and emotional aspects of their work when serving their clients.

Above all, the literature on street level bureaucrats emphasizes that workers seek to and do use discretion in helping clients. Directly, this use of personal discretion is found in the day-to-day work and decisions of workers. Discretion is often understood to be unavoidable; those involved in implementing policy will influence how policies are carried out (Hoye 2013: 189). Hoye's (2013) study emphasizes that workers—in her case, nurses—use discretion in serving clients. She shows that nurses had varied interpretations of rules, and that they acted on those interpretations in the context of their work. Like Watkins-Hayes, she shows that nurses fight back against policies by attempting to change the rules to fit the needs of the patient. The policies, which are put in place for their patients, are used by the nurses to make the system easier and more accessible. The best policies for the nurses are kept, and the policies that cause nurses to have a difficult time providing services are altered by the nurses. This emphasis on discretion and resistance is also found in other scholarship on street-level bureaucrats. Taylor and Kelly (2006: 631) for example, show that street-level bureaucrats use three kinds of discretion: *rule discretion*, *value discretion*, and *task discretion*. These correspond to actions that challenge formal systems, the values that underlie them, and the activities they are

supposed to carry out.

What this work presumes, as in the case of other scholarship on street-level bureaucrats, is that workers have the capacity to resist and want to resist in order to serve clients. But it is questionable whether we should assume that the professionals who are working with the clients are always entirely sympathetic to them. And it is not clear that the worker has the capacity to resist and alter the way that policy affects their clients in their given role. We can also say that we should not assume that policies are even rejected by workers. There is reason to think that these are not accurate ways to understand the client-professional relationship.

For one thing, street level bureaucrats are often one- or-two steps away from the life conditions of the people they serve. For instance, the workers may come from similar neighborhoods, may share ethnicity, and may have struggled through some of the same problems as their clients, such as conditions of single-parenthood and job insecurities. If workers share the same backgrounds, they may feel sympathetic to their clients, or they may feel that they have overcome their challenges to obtain success, which places them at a higher status than those they serve. This could cause changes in the way workers, serve, view, engage, and respond to their clients and their direct needs.

The underlying process is analyzed in W.E.B. DuBois' book *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (1935). He shows this process wherein whites and blacks were split off from each other as a class because the white wealthy classes offered whites the status of being white; although they were of the same social class as blacks, whites gained status through racialization. Similarly, Karl Marx (1906) and subsequent

writers have shown that people in the working classes are highly likely to be disdainful of the poor, because the working classes are often at risk of falling back into that class, or feel as if they have risen above it. Since they may believe they have risen above it, they may expect that others ought to as well. So, although it might be assumed that workers from the same background might be more understanding of, or sympathize with the needs of the client, it also might be the case that they are hyper-critical of the clients, too. As Marx (1906) argued, this is an important way to ensure the class system is reproduced: by giving a small number of people from the same class social status a small amount of power, the elite classes are able to control others at their economic level without the overt need for upper-class control. This suggests that some workers may in fact feel distant from, and not sympathetic to, the clients that they serve.

Also, as suggested above, most of the literature on street-level bureaucrats implies that social service deliverers have discretion in applying rules. That might be truer in some situations and jobs than others. For example, this could be the case with a social worker that provides many different services, and is in charge of a variety of aspects of a client's life. It might also be true of people who work in settings where they do not have systems that check—often electronically—all of the steps they take, or which force choices upon the worker. In the contemporary world of social welfare provision, where there is an expansion of rules and surveillance of clients and workers, this assumption may not be reasonable.

In places where the work of a street-level bureaucrat is broken into small pieces that must be undertaken in a particular order by certain people with specific job titles,

street level bureaucrats may not be able to do very much to alter policies (Willse 2008). The hyper-bureaucratization of social welfare means that workers have ever smaller domains of control, as Weber showed in his classic study of bureaucracy. The specialization of workers' roles also provides workers with a narrow view of the client; by this I mean that workers only are responsible to assist in one area of the client's life. Although this specialization may be seen as a good feature, it locks workers into a system of only seeing one side of clients' challenges while not being able to address clients' needs holistically. Also personal challenges can overlap, which then cause other issues. For example, the housing specialist is responsible for locating resources or referring clients to organizations and agencies that can assist clients in securing stable housing. However, other social factors (unemployment or emotional issues) may be contributing to the client's need or inability to secure stable housing. Moreover, workers in contemporary social welfare provision systems do not work with the same client for an extended period of time. Clients come in and are often funneled off to another person or program; they are not part of a long-term caseload where the client interacts with one person over a considerable period. In the contemporary social welfare system, clients do come back through the system—but as new clients who have to begin again, or repeat steps in some way. Changes may include different specialists and perhaps new problems that channel clients into different pathways of assistance.

In conclusion, existing literature suggests that street-level bureaucrats may or may not express sympathy toward their clients, or be in a position to bend rules to help them, not due to any shortcomings in the workers, but because of organizational systems and

the class system. Next, I turn to a review of the food stamp/SNAP system and its changes, before delving into how the workers assist clients at a Chicago-based organization that links clients to jobs so that clients can receive SNAP benefits.

Understanding the World of SNAP Workers: Food Stamps and SNAP 101

As I suggested earlier, in 1930s the Food Stamp Program, now known as SNAP, was created. First created in May 16, 1939 and in existence through 1943, the program now known as SNAP developed because of the need to assist struggling families experiencing hunger during the Great Depression. According to the USDA, over the course of its first four years the program reached about 20 million people and ended because social issues such as unemployment and shortages of food no longer existed.¹

The second wave of the food stamp program started with the Food Stamp Act of 1964; it was implemented to strengthen the agricultural economy and improve levels of nutrition among low-income households. In 1974 the food stamp program became accessible to citizens in Puerto Rico; this boosted participation to almost 14 million.² Congress enacted new legislative changes that began to be put in place in The Food Stamp Act of 1977. For Congress, it was important to target the neediest citizens and tighten controls to reduce errors. In the 1980s, the rise of social and fiscal conservatism under Reagan, and the attendant blaming of the poor for their plight, began in earnest. Congress cut the program budget, and made stricter annual adjustments to food stamp allotments. During this period, Congress eliminated the sales tax on food stamps

¹ <http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/short-history-snap>

² <http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/short-history-snap>

purchases, and expanded nutrition education (Mink and Solinger 2003).

From 1988 to 2004, the USDA developed the electronic benefit transfer (EBT) system. EBT is an electronic system that allows welfare agencies to issue aid benefits to clients on a payment card. Once eligibility is approved each client has an account that they activate with a PIN (personal identification number) that has benefits (cash/food) deposited electronically every month. Each account has the personal information (name, address, phone, account balance, and transactions) of the client that was provided in the application process. Clients can use their card similar to a bank debit card: it provides them with their balance, list of transactions, and PIN card number that can be changed at any time. Implementing the EBT system made it easier to apply, receive benefits, and helped reduce food stamp fraud (Mink and Solinger 2003). Because of cutbacks to the program, four million citizens were removed from the food stamp program, beginning November 1, 2013.

In addition, SNAP eligibility is now complex. On the state of Illinois Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) website, for example, it states that “Most households with low income can get SNAP benefits. The rules are complex, so all of the details are not here.”³ In reading that introduction alone we can conclude that one must need assistance just navigating the food assistance system. This is a major reason why studying the role of the SNAP worker is important. They become the “first responders” in that they often help people to get a bare minimum of services to families in immediate crisis and are the “last resorts,” leveraged when no other options remain

³ www.dhs.state.il.us

(Hayes 2009: 31).

Where SNAP Clients Meet Street-Level Bureaucrats: The Work of Workforce Development Centers and the People Who Staff Them

Workforce development centers provide three levels of service: core services, intensive services, and training services.⁴ The *core services* are provided to all adults (18 and over) and have no eligibility requirement, which means that these services are available free to the community (public). Specifically, core services include job searches and placement assistance, training information, job readiness workshops (topics vary by each location), information and assistance with obtaining unemployment benefits, childcare, and transportation assistance. The second level, *intensive services*, are geared toward participants that were unable to find work after utilizing the core services. These participants receive services such as case management, development of individual employment plans, individual career counseling, comprehensive employment assessments, and assistance in obtaining GED (General Education Degree) for participants who have not completed high school. The last level of service is *training services*. This level is only provided for participants who have been unable to find work through core services and intensive services. Training services include education and employment training services that are offered at no cost to the participant. These training services are a broad array of services that vary from occupational skills training, on-the-job training, adult education and literacy activities, cooperative education programs, training programs operated by the private sector, and customized training conducted by

⁴ http://www.illinoisworknet.com/vos_portal/WIA_Works/en/Home/About/WIA+Services/

an employer.

The purpose of workforce development centers, therefore, is to have a range of activities and services geared toward increasing employment, economic earnings, and job retention of participants. All of these activities vary somewhat at each location, and are tailored to the community and participants. According to the WIA, Works Illinois website, each workforce development center has the autonomy to tailor services to meet the needs of the participants in their community.⁵

For example, if a location has a large number of participants in need of obtaining a GED the location may hold GED classes at their center. In turn, these activities are provided to help improve the quality of the workforce and reduce welfare dependency. The employment offices are generally located throughout the community and seek to serve a diverse group of individuals, such as unemployed job seekers, laid off workers, the formally incarcerated, veterans, individuals with disabilities, and youth. The overall focus of the workforce centers is to reduce the need to utilize public assistance programs (such as SNAP) by emphasizing skills needed for self-sufficiency. Workforce center staff attempt to assist participants in gaining this self-sufficiency through the attainment of what they call basic skills competencies, including occupational and academic training, to become competitive in the workforce. Also, it has to be noted that each participant has a different set of skills and strengths, and therefore may or may not need all levels of service in order to obtain employment. However, the overall goal is to reduce the numbers of consumers of welfare services and reduce the possibility of participants

⁵ http://www.illinoisworknet.com/vos_portal/WIA_Works/en/Home/About/WIA+Services/

returning to or being dependent on assistance to sustain themselves economically.

One such workforce center is the Brighter Days Workforce Center (BDWC) in Chicago, the site of this study, which I describe below. Because of the economic downturn in 2009, many Americans began reaching toward government assistance programs, such as SNAP, in order to stay financially afloat and to feed their families. In 2009, Congress passed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) to boost the economy during what is now called The Great Recession. ARRA provided for the expansion of unemployment benefits and a temporary increase in food stamp benefits for needy families. However, in November 2013, these increases in SNAP benefits expired, meaning that every SNAP household experienced some reduction in benefits as a result of these cuts. According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), it is estimated that recent SNAP cuts will reduce the food assistance program by \$34 billion over the next ten years.⁶

SNAP eligibility requirements vary depending on one's economic and social situation, such as wages, disability and age, and work history. Further, because each client's level of literacy and possible relationship to the criminal justice system is interrogated, the role of the SNAP worker becomes important in the process of obtaining benefits. Some individuals and families cannot receive SNAP benefits despite their income. Examples are non-citizens, workers on strike, and people who live in certain institutions. If all other areas point toward eligibility, household size determines the maximum SNAP benefit.

⁶ http://grants.nih.gov/recovery/faqs_recovery.html

The complexities of eligibility strengthens the importance of understanding how social policy works on the ground level, beginning with the first point of contact, the SNAP worker. This study is intended to reveal the experiences of SNAP workers under an ever-changing, emotionally challenging and complex system. Moreover, in an attempt to understand SNAP workers' vital role in providing assistance to the poor, this study seeks to understand if and how policy shifts impact those assisting others in obtaining SNAP and related services. As Watkins-Hayes (2009) states, "In welfare offices, civil servants are expected to fit complicated, ever changing, often heartbreaking, and sometimes distorted accounts of low-income women (and men) into categories and then to use these classifications as a basis upon which to dispense cash and in-kind resources" (4).

Policy shifts create challenges for the poor; they also create challenges for people working to provide social services to them. Due to the recent collapse of the economy many Americans have been faced with unemployment or underemployment. While struggling to make ends meet, citizens are forced to seek help from government assistance programs such as SNAP to keep food on the table.

Studying What SNAP Workers Do: Methods and Analytic Strategy

In order to better understand how the SNAP process works, I observed workers and clients at the Brighter Days Workforce Center, described below, and conducted face-to-face interviews with five SNAP workers. I observed the ways SNAP workers' abilities to assist their clients are shaped by policy changes and how they work to maneuver around constraints to provide services. I also examined the organization's policy

documents to better understand the structure of the organization and how their clients are characterized. Specifically, I was looking to see how SNAP workers navigate bureaucratic restrictions and pressures as they attempt to deliver services.

I recruited interviewees in two stages: I sent an email to the founder of Brighter Days Workforce Center, asking permission to observe and interview SNAP workers. I also posted a recruitment flyer with information about the project with the researcher's personal contact information listed in the Workforce Director's office at BDWC. The workers who potentially qualified for the study were asked to forward the email notice to the researcher. I then scheduled dates and times with the participants for an interview. Prior to the interviews participants were asked to read and sign an informed consent document and were informed about the purpose of the researcher's study. Interviews lasted from thirty to sixty minutes, and were audio taped with permission from each interviewee. During the interview I agreed to answer any questions the participant might have regarding the study and informed the participant of her right to decline to answer any question or stop the interview at any time. All interviewees were asked to share their work experiences in relation to their clients, and how new shifts in policy have impacted their ability to provide resources to the poor. Interview topics included examples of work experiences before and after the SNAP reductions, management of clientele, the overall process of SNAP implementation, professional identity and role conflict. Once the interviews were completed, the tapes and transcripts were stored at Loyola University Chicago, only accessible to the researcher. At the close of the study all documents will be destroyed.

The Brighter Days Workforce Center

Brighter Days Workforce Center (BDWC) was founded in 1971. The mission of the organization is to improve the quality of life and provide resources to Bronzeville and surrounding neighborhood residents in Chicago, Illinois. The majority of the clients assisted by BDWC are residents of units managed by the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) and/or are referred from the local public aid office or from other governmental programs (addressed below) servicing needy populations. The organization's documents stress its commitment to the community and to assisting families in becoming self-reliant. Located in Bronzeville, a majority African American neighborhood on the south side of Chicago, historically known as a major residential area of former slaves during the Great Migration searching for employment and educational opportunities for their families.

According to the *Encyclopedia of Chicago*,

The Great Migration, a long-term movement of African Americans from the South to the urban North, transformed Chicago and other northern cities between 1916 and 1970. Chicago attracted slightly more than 500,000 of the approximately 7 million African Americans who left the South during these decades. Before this migration, African Americans constituted 2 percent of Chicago's population; by 1970, they were 33 percent. What had been in the nineteenth century a largely southern and rural African American culture became a culture deeply infused with urban sensibility in the twentieth century. And what had been a marginalized population in Chicago emerged by the mid-twentieth century as a powerful force in the city's political, economic, and cultural life. Factories opened the doors to black workers, providing opportunities to black southerners eager to stake their claims to full citizenship through their role in the industrial economy. For black women the doors opened only slightly and temporarily, but even domestic work in Chicago offered higher wages and more personal autonomy than in the South. The Great Migration established the foundation of Chicago's African American industrial working class. Despite the tensions between newcomers and "old settlers," related to differences in age, region of origin, and class, the Great Migration established the foundation for black political power,

business enterprise, and union activism.
(<http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/545.html>)

Self-reliance in the organization's terms means becoming reasonably economically secure and independent of government assistance programs; generally, providing clients the tools and skills that strengthen families and communities, such as employment readiness opportunities, enhanced education and referral services. Once clients gain greater economic security, these community residents may then be able to contribute to the rebuilding of their communities and create an economically viable environment for themselves and their families. BDWC also creates a safe space for children to be educated and provided with the tools needed to develop positive goals for the future. The BDWC mission draws mainly on two African principles: *kujitegemea* (self-reliance) and *ujima* (collective work and responsibility). These African-centered concepts and principles were evidenced in the workers' attitudes across the staff interviews; many mentioned that they push clients toward *kujitegemea*. That is to say that that they work toward clients taking care of themselves and their families. One of the workers, an employment specialist, shared her advice to clients with the interviewer:

I tell them... You have to understand, when you have assistance from the government, you have to follow their rules of what you have to do to get those benefits. So I am like look, what I am asking you to do is to get it together and get employed, stay employed, so you don't need they help.

By taking individual responsibility for one's own actions and becoming proactive in trying to make a better life for themselves clients can hopefully pull themselves out of the cycle of poverty. An Intake Specialist recalls his own struggle to become independent of government assistance:

I was a SNAP client when I first came here in 2011, I was getting about \$200 back then and I had to do my 20 hours a week to stay on. I was determined though, always grinded and trying to strive for better. I stayed in the program for a few months until I found work.

Workers share the understanding that clients can become self-sufficient and independent of government funding; however they also state that assistance is needed to achieve this goal. They often speak of the clients' being able to survive without the program or assistance from the government, and consistently state that social service programs are not always going to be available as a resource for clients. In the effort to prepare clients for a time when services may be limited or no longer available, staff take on the responsibility of making sure their clients are "work ready." As a collective unit understood as a team, they provide the support that clients need in order to take ownership of their situations and move forward. The Workforce Development manager speaks of supporting the clients in this way:

We are all about working as a team and team building. Our team is how our clients receive their support...we see them come in from start to finish, it's a great feeling knowing they have found work and can be more financially stable and provide for their families. It is a team. We are all involved in making sure the clients know that they have a team behind them. Sometimes all we need is a little support you know.

In the African-centered tradition of *ujima* (collective work and responsibility), collective responsibility is a principle that teaches the necessity to work together to build up individuals in one's community in order to create a better society. This means that problems of an individual are not looked at as isolated situations but as issues that impact the community as a whole. Addressing issues in this way is a part of the organization's overall mission. In understanding things in this way, an individual's challenges are seen

as a community issue. In other words, to build and maintain a strong community, workers must make their brothers' and sisters' problems their own problems, and then work to solve them together. So collectively, as a team keeping the commitment to work on repairing and renewing the community, *ujima* is foundational to BDWC and is echoed in the attitudes of the workers as they provide service to the clients. These principles seemed important for team members in the way that they operated because they provided a theme or foundation for knowing how they should guide and service their clients. It might be said, then, that these principles not only support clients but workers as well. It is evident from the interviews that the organization uses these values as pillars to guide their work. The interviewees at BDWC have a strong commitment to make sure that each client is linked to vital community resources, prepared to thrive in a competitive job market, and take full advantage of opportunities that the organization presents to them. BDWC workers believe that these resources will allow the client to become what SNAP workers called "work-ready."

The unit in which the SNAP workers I interviewed are assigned is the BDWC Workforce Development Program. Workforce Development has relationships with four programs that service BDWC clients and their families: The 741 Collaborative; IDHS TANF-Workfirst; CHA Family Works; and SNAP. The 741 Collaborative is a collaborative of Chicago non-profit agencies working in unison to provide employment opportunities for individuals in the South Lakefront communities of Bronzeville, North Kenwood, Oakland, Douglas and Grand Boulevard. As direct service providers, their partner organizations work together to offer the right combination of recruitment and job

placement services for every employer and job seeker they encounter. To qualify for services, individuals must be residents of the South Lakefront communities of Bronzeville, North Kenwood, Oakland, Douglas or Grand Boulevard.⁷ According to the Illinois Department of Human Services website (IDHS) informs, explains and connects eligible clients to a wide range of human services at locations across the state.

Using a family-centered approach in addition to other client-service skills, local IDHS professionals confer with individuals seeking assistance to determine their eligibility and link them to appropriate training, child care and job opportunities. Professional staff makes referrals to other local community programs offering counseling and/or treatment services for substance abuse, developmental disabilities and mental health problems. IDHS TANF-Workfirst and SNAP are designed to help TANF clients who live in Cook County and who have multiple social barriers to gain the job training and soft skills they need to become employed and to retain employment. The term *soft skills* is used by the organization and consists of learning how to effectively communicate with others, acquire social graces, develop problem solving skills, and the use of networking. These skills can be seen as transferable to the workplace, as well as being useful in general social settings.

The majority of program participants receiving TANF and SNAP benefits are adults in Cook County who have been unsuccessful in other employment and training programs, and who have multiple barriers that prevent them gaining and/or retaining

⁷ <http://www.741partners.org/index.html>

employment.⁸ These obstacles include gaps in employment, housing issues/homelessness, learning disabilities, childcare assistance needs, a suspended driver's license, lack of education or literacy, or a criminal record. These circumstances are all seen as individual “barriers” to employment they are areas in which workers aim to assist clients in order that they might gain employment. Through contractual agreements with community-based organizations, such as Brighter Days Workforce Center, TANF clients are assigned to employment or educational training activities for a specified number of hours in an effort to overcome such barriers, gain valuable employment skills, and earn their food (SNAP benefits) and/or financial assistance checks (cash assistance).

Findings

Findings I: Workers Do Not Challenge the System; They Identify with the System and Work to Deliver SNAP Benefits by Ensuring that Clients Are “Work Ready” through Team Work.

As a provider of services to the State of Illinois and to partner organizations that deliver “work ready” clients to employers, BDWC’s Employment Specialist (SNAP worker) is responsible for placing clients in unsubsidized employment and tracking the number of hours worked. The Intake Specialist explains the tracking process:

The work sites have log sheets that keep track and SNAP clients are only allowed to miss one day, that’s one strike to get their benefits case dismissed and they lose benefits for 3 months. SNAP clients you know got to understand that it’s providing temporary assistance for needy families, it’s not permanent.

Work First participants are referred by the DHS Family Community Resource

⁸ <http://www.dhs.state.il.us/page.aspx?item=31775>

Center. CHA Family Works operates in conjunction with Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) Centers to provide former and current CHA residents with employment and housing assistance, and linkages to City-Wide CHA sponsored programs, services, and other community resources. The main purpose of CHA FamilyWorks is to assist residents that are engaged in relocation process, as they move out into new mixed income developments, rehabbed units, or utilize the housing choice voucher program to find employment, enroll in continuing educational programs (such as GED), or participate in job training programs. FamilyWorks aims to get its clients to develop specific, identifiable outcomes, in particular, lease compliance, employment preparation and employment retention.⁹ The Intake Specialist informed me of all the services that BDWC provides:

Well we help with childcare, literacy, we have GED classes, whatever is needed in order to assist them in becoming work ready. They are placed at different sites like Walgreens, hotels, homecare, healthcare, teaching assistants, or CNA positions.

The Intake Specialist (IS) is the initial face of the BDWC for people who will use their employment programs. The IS facilitates the introduction and orientation sessions for job seekers. The IS also assists clients with initial paperwork that includes employment background and community assessment. (What does this mean, “community assessment”)? The aim of this intake is to assess clients’ readiness, ability, and barriers to work and their suitability for training and employment services at the BDWC. The Intake Specialist stresses the importance of clients being ready to work:

⁹ <http://www.cnh.org/Family%20Works.htm>

It's the rules of the local office. You have to follow the rules to continue to get the benefits that is why we want to make them work ready, we want them to think about what they want to do, and be honest about their background so we can help them. We get them ready because some have been out of work for a while, so we talk about dress code, and drug testing. You can't get a job if you don't pass the drug test. These things get them to the point of being self-sufficient.

The Workforce Development Manager also addresses the importance of overcoming barriers to becoming "work ready":

Some of our clients are difficult to place because they have backgrounds or lack education such as a GED. Most places want you to at least have your GED to even apply for the position. We have to know these qualifications so we can better prepare our clients in our job readiness training programs. It is important that we can provide them with additional education or skills that are needed in the job market. So we ask employers questions like "What makes a strong candidate?" Or "What does a person that gets hired here look like."

The Employment Specialist, who is the major subject of this thesis, is what I have called the SNAP worker, and this individual has many roles, including working closely with the client, acting in many informal and formal roles, from career counselor to caseworker. By career counseling I mean having one-on-one meetings with clients to find out what career interests and current skills they possess in order to work toward seeking positions that will fit the client's abilities and educational background. It also includes researching job descriptions and desired positions with clients to understand what is required to obtain employment. Perhaps, for example, a position will require certain education levels or vocational training. If the client's current skills do not match the requirements, this area of a client's background must be strengthened. BDWC workers use a social work case management model, providing individual services such as career counseling, mock interviewing, testing, and job development training to engage each client. By social work

case management I mean that the Employment Specialist works collaboratively with the client to assess their needs and those of the family. When appropriate the employment specialist facilitates, monitors, evaluates, and advocates for resources that meet the client's needs. The main goal of the Employment Specialist is to assist disadvantaged clients in overcoming barriers and securing employment. This role requires the worker to develop a relationship with the client, which can include referring them to agencies or organizational services that provide the family with the needed resources. This Employment Specialist speaks to the impact of the recent state cuts and how she motivates her clients to stay in compliance with the rules:

State cuts, they have such a huge impact. It does impact the clients because the state has to do . . . well has those budget cuts and we heard them say that they are either taking the whole program or cutting your benefits. It is hard for our clients to understand that they have to volunteer for \$180 of benefits, 20 hours a week; it is something that you have to explain to them. Like, look, this program is here to help you be self-sufficient and let go of those benefits because they are telling you how much you to spend on your food.

The Housing Specialists assist clients in obtaining or maintaining stable housing or locate shelter and resources. Housing Specialists can provide referrals to agencies and assist in arrangements. This role is vital because it assists clients in overcoming the barrier of homelessness in order to secure employment. It is important for clients to have a current, stable place of residence, not only for the purpose of gaining stability but because most places of employment require a current address to be listed on applications. A permanent place of residence also makes it easier for workers to contact the client and for the client to focus on goals.

The Business Specialist (BS) works to create partnerships with corporations and companies to gain knowledge about what skills and education are needed if clients are to gain employment. The BS makes sure that training programs and workshops at BDWC are aligned with employers' direct needs. This allows the individual client and the

organization to remain abreast of the relevant skills needed and to know what current employers are seeking in order to secure employment. BDWC believes that this team of workers can best assist clients in creating a system to guide the clients through the process of becoming “work-ready” and self-sufficient. I am most interested in how the Employment Specialists, (SNAP workers) engage clients on an intimate level to assess their needs and assist them through the process of obtaining employment.

The concept of being “work-ready” was addressed numerous times while interviewing SNAP workers for this study, each echoing a similar definition and meaning of the term. In essence, I concluded that the organization believes that individuals that are “work-ready” consistently display characteristics, social behaviors, and attitudes that are thought to be essential to securing meaningful employment. These include a demonstration of diligent personal investment in their education and job training, and a “positive” attitude. Examples of being “work-ready” given by SNAP workers include keeping a positive attitude, having a good work ethic, being on time, using professional courtesy, and “dressing for success.” Some of these qualities are directly measured and evaluated, and SNAP workers are involved in developing and managing benchmarks reached by clients in the program.

Findings II: Workers Dis-identify with Clients, and Work toward Processing Them to Remedy Their “Deficits.”

Criminal History

Many of the problems that the workers try to solve are issues related to poverty and the high incarceration rates of African American men. As one Intake Specialist said,

A lot of them have backgrounds, like criminal histories and may have felonies. It's hard for them to find work. We do a background check here for sexual assaults and convictions but if they have sexual offenses we can't help them at our agency and they are sent to another agency.

Similarly, another worker, a PD, said,

So typically it is due to various reasons, mostly re-entry populations and tarnished backgrounds, so it's hard to find a job, so those are the barriers that come along with those clients, mostly, mainly a background issue, I would say that is the number one challenge that SNAP clients come with, so on our end helping them find employment can be challenging because most of them have backgrounds.

Clients Quit Jobs

Other issues that come up for the workers include clients quitting their jobs or failing to follow rules. As one Workforce Development Manager said

We are all about working as a team and team building. Our team is how our clients receive their support. Clients who quit their jobs create difficulty for other clients interviewing with the same company. It also looks bad on us on the placement side; they quit for various reasons, never good ones if you ask me. Just because they don't like the manager or a worker. Maybe the hours are not what they want but they come in really wanting the job and after all of our hard work trying to place them they give it up. It can be frustrating at times but our team knows it comes with the position. Not everyone will like his or her position you know. We work hard to find out what they like too, we never force them to positions they don't like because we want them to remain hired and not depended on stamps to survive.

Sometimes these problems are seen not just as problems for the clients, but problems that the clients cause for the agency:

Getting the clients in on time can be difficult. We had to start a bit later today to accommodate them. It's hard getting them back going in the workforce, being on time, waking up, dressing for success, they can be asked to go on an interview the same day, so we don't want to send them out and they are not presentable. They reflect us and the clients that come behind them, employers may be like, "Don't send another one of those workers back." Or they can be like, "send me like ten more of those

workers because we have slots to fill.” Getting them to understand that is important.

Clients Don't Have the Proper Attire

Again, sometimes the deficits that the clients face might be related to their poverty and lack of knowledge of the right way to dress for work, but because of the way that work is organized at the Center, the workers see this as an individual-level issue, but one that the agency can deal with. As one worker said,

Yeah, we also provide clients with clothes for their interviews if they don't have the right things to wear. Appearance is important so community members, co-workers, churches, and some of our past clients donate clothing for some who just don't have the funds to purchase a business attire suit or dress. That is important to and helps the client feel more confident which will help bring out their best qualities. Because they have skills and are qualified it's just about finding the right fit for them.

Remedying Deficits Through a Team-Based Approach

It was a cold winter morning when I arrived at the Brighter Days Workforce Center (BDWC) located near the legendary Martin Luther King Jr. Drive in the historic Southside Bronzeville neighborhood in Chicago. The Workforce Development building, the site of my observations and interviews, is nestled in on the 43rd street, a small brown brick, one story building, displaying the logo of an Egyptian pyramid with the brown images of two adult figures in the middle nurturing two children. There is only one visible entrance, with two doors that can only be entered by ringing the bell. It was clear from the security camera pointed down at the doorway that this space was under surveillance. There were signs posted on the outside of the door reminding occupants to close the door behind them and to be mindful of keeping the space safe.

Upon entry I observed a glass window and on the other side the smiling face of

the secretary motioned me to step forward. I signed in for my appointment and was directed to wait for a worker to walk me to the orientation. While I sat in the front waiting area there were signs posted reminding clients to keep up with appointment times, not to use cellphones, of the center's mission, of the availability of free tutoring and of various educational workshops at the organization or throughout the city. I was led to the back office, where the centers' operations are managed and workers' cubicles are located. There were reminder signs about the Workforce Orientation that was scheduled for that morning at nine. This was the first intake session for clients enrolled in the "work ready" programs provided by the BDWC. Each program (174 Program, WorkFirst, IDHS, and SNAP) separated the clients by how they had been referred to the BDWC.

The Tuesday morning group orientation led by an Intake Specialist was the clients' first point of contact with the workers who will be assisting them in becoming "work ready" and providing them with resources to eventually become self-sufficient. In orientation the Intake Specialist gives an overview of the weeks' activities. This includes helping clients set appointments with an Employment Specialist, a Housing Specialist and a Business Specialist. These meetings are essential to assessing the direct needs of the client and setting long/short term goals that will strengthen the clients' ability to become employed.

The back office was a bustling environment, with co-workers entering the office with energetic "good mornings" and warm greetings to each other. Above the office entrance was a larger white sign: "Quiet Zone: Staff are Working." The office was divided into cubicles. Each employee is assigned a cubicle. Every space was neat, and

within each cubicle is a shelf that holds large binders that were clearly labeled lined or stacked in a row and served to organize each caseload so paperwork could be stored efficiently. Each worker had an assigned cubicle that was used to provide one on one counseling services and space to complete client's intake/follow up paperwork. There was constant movement in the back office space, with workers traveling in and out, some carrying folders or binders, others holding papers to send off. Workers were checking in with others about vacation time, and conversations included how to get resources for clients, payroll, and transportation reimbursement for workers who provide home visits to clients. All activity seemed to move in a fluid and seamless way.

Inside the center there was a hallway that twisted and turned into different rooms. Each space had a purpose for the client and every space displayed flyers with information on community resources. The flyers and information listed other programs at and outside the agency and additional opportunities on the walls, from GED classes to fatherhood programs, handouts and flyers were visible and accessible to the client. Notices of job positions open for those interested in working with the Safe Passage Program, a program that utilizes parents in the community to stand along school routes and ensure students are safe in going to and from school. The computer lab had about fifteen computers that faced toward the windows that allowed people entering to glimpse what each person was working on. There was also a login name and password to access the computers. A client entered and sat at a computer; after a few minutes of typing she motioned for the intake worker over. "Why can't I log in?" She paused. "That's why I don't like this place". The intake worker responded, "You have to know your login name and password...can you

recall this information?” “No,” she snapped. Both looked at each other as if they approached a stalemate. The intake worker moved the encounter forward, “You have to know this information or wait until someone can get it for you.” Silence. Other clients stopped in and out looking at the resource flyers and handouts that lined the tables and walls. Inspirational quotes were placed in the middle of the walls. One reads, “The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.”

I was led to the BDWC community room by the Intake Specialist to wait for the orientation to begin. The room was empty and the session was to begin in five minutes. There was great confusion among caseworkers about why clients had yet to come in. Some caseworkers stopped and checked the time, then checked the status of attendance in the community room. Heads peeked in and out, framed with puzzled looks of uncertainty. “Monday is usually our busiest day,” the Intake Specialist shared with me. It was clear that the lack of participants was not common. The tension was high among workers, who were walking back and forth. Then it happened. A line of clients came streaming in the community room like a slow and then heavy flow from a water faucet. It was cold in the community room; the winter temperatures from outside had slowly made their presence inside and there was no additional heat to take off the chill. “That’s why I don’t like this place,” a voice of a woman echoed in the hallway outside the door. She shifted back and forth with an urgency to enter and then disappeared across to the computer lab. She wasn’t the only person that was anxious and a bit impatient: the Intake Specialist also wandered back and forth waiting for a good time to begin the session. It was evident that some late arrivals were normal but never was an entire group tardy.

At this event, clients receive a formal introduction to the BDWC through a morning orientation led by the Intake Specialist. What most of them didn't know until mid-orientation was that their Intake Specialist was also a former SNAP client who says that she understands the struggles of navigating through the program and achieving its goals (self-sufficiency). As the room began to fill chairs were lined up for staff that were to be in attendance, including Employment Specialists, the Office Manager, and a Business Specialist, who all sit in on the orientation and are ready to answer any questions that may arise. The Intake Specialist grabbed a clipboard and called out a list of clients that should have been in attendance. The Intake Specialist began checking off each name ever so carefully and making eye contact with each client with a quick glance. Once attendance was completed, he introduced himself and the attending staff members. Then he began to give a well-rehearsed and well-crafted opening to the orientation session. It included a story of the rich history of the BDWC serving their community since 1971, the detailed explanation of the Workforce Development programs, and a brief outline of the week's activities that each client would attend (depending on their program requirements). The room is silent and clients sit, attentively listening to the proposed requirements to complete the program and obtain employment. Some take notes. There are twelve in attendance, two men, one African American and one Latino, and ten women, all African American. As introductions are underway one client does not respond to the Intake Specialist's invitation to share one's name, age, employment experience and one thing that is important to gain from the program. She is an older African American woman, fair and small in frame, wearing a wool red hat and scarf. She leans into the table

with her head down and face void of expression. The Intake Specialist addresses her about her hat and scarf, as it was against policy to wear these items inside the center for security reasons. Unmoved by his remarks and light threats to ask her to leave if she continues to be unresponsive, she sat solemnly, holding firm to her silence.

The Intake Specialist leaves the situation with the unresponsive client and urges clients to bring a positive attitude, be willing to develop a skill set, bring up their educational skills by participating in GED classes or following through in completing the trainings such as the customer service training. All of these actions, he assured them, would bring them to the point of being “work ready.” He continued to inform the group that there was a two day orientation process in which clients would be assigned an Employment Specialist, begin their one week JRT (Job Readiness Training), and aptitude testing. Clients are asked to fill out a number of assessment forms that covered employment, education, and criminal background history. In addition, clients are asked to fill out an assessment that covers their personal barriers such as if there is any history of drug or alcohol abuse, childcare, or literacy issues that might inhibit their ability to participate in the workforce program.

As noted above, SNAP clients must volunteer twenty hours a week: that equals eighty hours a month. There are also strict ways that employment is tracked by timesheets that must be handed into the Employment Specialist. Transportation would be provided, if needed, to the employment site. Clients may be placed at sites such as Walgreens, hotels, healthcare agencies, homecare/certified nurse’s assistant work, or as teaching assistants. Although these jobs sound promising not everyone will be placed in

one of them because of the different employment backgrounds and educational statuses of each client. Also, clients were instructed to make sure they were on time and ready for work. Any infractions, they were warned, would result in their SNAP/TANF case being dismissed and the loss of benefits for three months.

The Intake Specialist made sure to inform the SNAP clients of the need to be in strict compliance with the rules in place in order to maintain eligibility: only one strike for SNAP clients; SNAP-TANF clients receive a bit more flexibility, with three chances to remain in compliance. Attending GED classes or college introductory courses could be counted for working hours. The floor was open to questions. One client speaks of not wanting to become “free labor” for the government. The group was non-responsive to the client and sat in silence looking at the Intake Specialist for an answer to the statement. The Intake Specialist reminded her that she is being provided with SNAP benefits that are not “freely given” but must be “worked off.” Her labor is in exchange for her stamps, says the worker, and reminds the client that the overall goal is to get clients back into the workforce so they don’t have to “depend on the government” or abide by these rules. The group sat in silence and the orientation was concluded.

It was clear after this first intake session that BDWC had a dual responsibility to work with clients to achieve their goal of gaining employment but to also reinforce the regulations and sanctions handed down by the government. To stay in compliance with the rules established for them, clients could utilize all available resources. However, one infraction could jeopardize this vital link to support and resources. Here I begin to understand the delicate dance of workers providing services and reinforcing policy.

Finding III: The Emotional Worlds of SNAP Workers: Dealing with Disappointments and Victories as Means of Demonstrating That the System Works.

One of the main findings in this thesis is that the SNAP workers saw the programs as working well for the clients. Even when they said, in an indirect way, that perhaps they did not work very well all the time, they quickly returned to the idea that the program was effective, sometimes relating their own experiences.

One shift in the approach to combating unemployment and poverty happened when Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), which replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, began to push clients who do not have custody of their children to enroll in workforce programs. This practice sometimes presents workers with a great challenge: how to place clients who do not fit the formal guidelines of an ideal worker? To the clients at the BDWC meeting this requirement can be a challenge in itself. “Jacky” recalls a client’s reaction:

Sometimes \$180 doesn’t get you nowhere. Although the Earnfare program is listed as voluntary, it is designed for unemployed, non-custodial parents as a way of participating in the Workforce Program in order to meet their portion of the child support obligation. It is court ordered in cases where non-custodial parents receive SNAP benefits and do not have a secure job. To be able to receive benefits SNAP clients generally have no or little income so they are required by law to attend a workforce development program that can link them to resources and opportunities.

As noted earlier, one of the major themes and goals of the BDWC is to ensure that each client is “work ready,” and the workers expressed, for the most part, support for this goal, even when they realized that at times it might be extremely challenging for the clients. “Jasmine,” an Intake Specialist, shared the reason for making sure clients are “work-ready”:

Many clients have not been in the workforce for some time, months or years, so they need to be reincorporated into this lifestyle; being able to wake up and arrive on time to a location can pose problems for some of our clients, especially if they are suffering from some type of addiction. We have to be the ones to prepare them, so when we send them out on the interviews they are sharp and ready to perform at their highest level. It's the rules of the local office. You have to follow the rules to continue to get the benefits; that is why we want to make them work ready, we want them to think about what they want to do, and be honest about their background so we can help them. We get them ready because some have been out of work for a while, so we talk about dress code, and drug testing. You can't get a job if you don't pass the drug test. These things get them to the point of being self-sufficient.

Even though the BDWC teams work diligently to prepare and equip each client with tools to be able to secure a job, things do not always work out as expected. Some are great success stories that inspire and fuel the team to continue to work tirelessly. This was the story shared by Jacky about her client, whom she stated carried a "big secret and a great drive" to become successful. The secret of being convicted of murder was revealed to her in a one-on-one session with her client.

We had a client come in about two years ago and back then I was an Intake Specialist. He had done 18 years for murder and he came here and we told him that we had to search our clients for past sex offenses. Those are the kinds that we can't help as much because they have to be sent to other agencies. He told me "Ma'am I did 18 years for murder." I believe he expected us to be like "Oh my God" but we looked at him like "Alright, so what did you do in those 18 years?" Cause they have choices, you can sit there for 18 years and have their life go by or you get a trade, GED, and he did. He actually became a mentor, certified and everything. He talked to Ms. Sherry. She put him to work on site here and sent him out on some interviews. He was only here for thirty days. Not because he left the program. He did what he needed to do. He got a job at L.A. Fitness janitorial. Then thirty days later he got another job and we got a call last year that he went from a regular employee to a manager. So those types of stories are a big deal for me.

Similar stories from workers seem to fuel staff and inspire them to continue diligently to

work with clients that must overcome seemingly insurmountable barriers to employment.

A BDWC Intake Specialist shared his personal success story of overcoming barriers and becoming work-ready in our interview, showing the kind of emotional work it took and how that influences him today:

I was a SNAP client when I first came here in 2011, I was getting about \$200 back then and I had to do my 20 hours a week to stay on. I was determined though, always grinded and trying to strive for better. I stayed in the program for a few months until I found work. It takes about a year outside the program you know 'cause I was looking. But here I developed a skill set and kept a positive attitude. They placed me at a work place and then I would come back to visit and say 'Hi,' you know. I appreciated them, I had really connected to the people here, and my Employment Specialist you know. Like family. Yeah, a family they take care of you and make sure you are work ready. You work on your professionalism and get your priorities in order so you can be self-sufficient, 'all about self-sufficiency.' So a position opened up and they asked me to apply. That's about two years ago now. Since I was here often I was excited for the position and work for them. It's a good feeling to give back.

This success story speaks to the core of what the BDWC program is reaching for with every client that steps through its doors: the opportunity to assist and serve clients that may otherwise be left behind to become a gainfully employed and transitioned back into the workforce.

Although the obstacles of this client are not rare the effort of the client to push toward his goal is the highlight of the story. Workers repeat that the importance of being "work ready" includes diligence and a positive attitude. It is also the ability of the client to see themselves as successful despite the challenges. This positive outlook seems to connect the worker to the client in ways that result in successful outcomes. It strengthens the bond of worker and client to both strive for the best despite the circumstances.

Jacky shares her story of clients' difficulty of staying on track and becoming work-ready:

Some (clients) have not worked for several years because they were incarcerated and others because they have had addictions to overcome. Umm sometimes their living situation, we sometimes have to send them here and there to fix this and fix that in order for them to get it together and if we don't fix everything else they will not be able to move on to employment. It is hard because we try to help and try to direct them to do this and that. Sometimes these are not the programs for them and then we have to send them back to the local office and tell them the situation going on with them and we need to find a different program to help them out. And they will be like 'I can't do it, I can't, this is not what I am used to.' But it is a great thing for us to help them and see them get employed and a great thing when they start doing real good. But it hurts when they go back and start doing the same thing that they were doing before, over and over. Then it is hard for them to accept that "my issues I won't be able to fix here." You know a lot of them leave and they call us, it would be like six and seven months, and they call us to tell us they are not doing well. Then they tell us that they are in another development program trying to get it together. But I mean this is something that I choose to do and I enjoy it because we learn from each other, it's a learning process.

The Employment Specialist, Intake Specialist, and Business Specialist all share similar stories of clients' victories, and those that were lost in the trials of attempting to overcome barriers to employment that were debilitating, such as addictions and urges to engage in illegal activity to provide for themselves or their families.

Workers often become disappointed with clients in whom they see potential to push through challenges. Although the workers see themselves as a tool of assistance, they also place sole responsibility on the clients for navigating through the program and overcoming personal challenges. The workers see the client not as a victim of the system or social circumstances but as an active part of a solution to achieve their goals. To the worker it is up to their client to assist herself in "fixing" the issues that are causing some

of the hardship. It is about worker and client working together and not solely up to the worker to solve problems.

Conclusion

I started this study assuming that SNAP workers would resist the change in food stamp cuts and disagree with the policy of pushing clients to become self-sufficient. I assumed that workers would use their power to assist clients in gaining resources to maintain their SNAP benefits. However, I found that workers did not have much power to create change in the system due to the overspecialization of their jobs and the restriction in their duties. Workers truly want to assist the client in securing employment and have a lot of emotion attached to the client's success or their lack of progress. Surprisingly, I found that workers agreed with policy of clients only having "temporary assistance." Further, workers actually made sure the clients followed all the regulations to remain eligible for benefits. A direct focus of workers was to find pathways for clients to gain their "independence" and not rely on any government programs.

I also found that workers looked at a client's hardships or challenges as individual "barriers" to success. These workers see themselves as individuals who have to come in and "fix" or assist the client in navigating these barriers. Workers take ownership of the task of guiding clients toward creating solutions to the "barriers" of employment. Such barriers include making sure that clients have attended all required workshops and trainings, researching ways to assist the client in gaining more education, vocational training, or linking clients to other social service agencies. Barriers were also not seen as excuses for clients not to successfully complete the program but as issues that one must

work through in order to become self-sufficient. The term “self-sufficient” is layered in definition, meaning that the client is “independent” of government assistance and, as noted earlier, also stands for one of the African principles, *kujitegemea* (self-reliance), that guides workers through their mission of service to the client. These African principles not only serve as a guide but as a motivator to workers, providing them purpose to continue to do the work of assisting clients with surmountable personal challenges.

Workers use these resources in order to make sure that clients are successful. However, from the interviews it seems that the client must have some qualities that will ensure their personal success. Not only must they attend all the workshops and trainings, they must also display a positive “attitude.” If the client possesses a positive attitude, it seems to translate to the workers that they are “work ready” and easy to guide through the program.

The main sociological conclusions are that unlike other studies of street-level bureaucrats, in this study the workers were more likely to identify with the goals and procedures of the program, and not to describe themselves as challenging them. As I have shown, the jobs at the agency are divided into very small pieces, and then joined together in a team, so that each worker is only focused on a small part of the clients’ lives and especially on the attitudes of the clients. Second, I also found that the workers were emotionally involved with their clients’ welfare, and held on to success stories, not failure stories. And third, I found that the meaning of self-sufficiency in this agency was not the same as the general meaning of the idea: the workers here used the ideas of *ujima*

and *kujitegumea* to describe the value of self-sufficiency, which was in part the idea that through self-reliance, you can contribute to the community, and that the workers were also contributing to the collective good of the community by ensuring self-sufficiency. Sociologically, this means that we should pay closer attention to what self-sufficiency means to people in practice, not just in the abstract.

APPENDIX A:
TASKS AND ACTIVITIES OF WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT CENTER JOBS

Intake Specialist: Performs various duties supporting the Employment Specialists in assisting clients in gaining employment experience and valuable job skills. Conducts intake assessments and orientation. Attends intake sessions with clients and supports clients in job searching online. Assists clients with resume development, interviewing skills and preparation for success in the workplace.

Employment Specialist: Develops and cultivates partnerships with employers to recruit employment opportunities. Assists clients in gaining employment experience and valuable job skills. Assist clients with resume development, interviewing skills and preparation for success in the workplace. Assesses and address participants' barriers to success. Develop and maintain referral relationships with social services agencies and community organizations. Does outreach at local housing projects. .

Housing Specialist: Provides housing referrals and assistance with housing placement by linking clients to resources from private and public agencies, and community groups.

Business Specialist: Has extensive knowledge of workforce program requirements in regards to job placement and job retention, in order to foster relationships with businesses that will in turn employ clients. Develops relationships with area businesses, colleges and employment training providers that will result in career path, entry-level and intermediate employment opportunities for clients.

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